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Bomb That Sank Greenpeace Ship Threatens to Sink French Regime

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PARIS — Controversy over France's sinking of the anti-nuclear protest ship Rainbow Warrior looks increasingly likely to dog President Francois Mitterrand for the rest of his term—and could even cut his tenure short.

The Socialist government's effort to defuse the scandal is faltering and conservative politicians have stepped up calls for Prime Minister Laurent Fabius to resign. Odds still favor the survival of Mr. Mitterrand and Mr. Fabius, at least for the time being, political analysts say. But the scandal is sapping confidence in a government already suffering from low popular support. Before the scandal broke, polls placed Mr. Mitterrand's public approval rating at only about 34%.

In Washington yesterday, the State Department joined the chorus of disapproval. "Of course we deplore such acts, wherever they may occur," a State Department spokesman said.

The Rainbow Warrior, flagship of the environmentalist group Greenpeace, exploded and sank in Auckland Harbor in New Zealand July 10 just before it was scheduled to lead a protest fleet to Mururoa Atoll, the site of French nuclear tests in the South Pacific. This week, Prime Minister Fabius said that Charles Hernu, who resigned as defense minister last week, and the sacked head of the French intelligence service, were responsible for the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior by a French underwater demolition team.

"Greenpeace will just increase the loss of confidence, and this will hurt the Socialists enormously in the next elections," said Stephane Carpin, a retired construction worker in Bordeaux.

With the March 1986 parliamentary elections approaching, speculation grows that Mr. Mitterrand may have to leave office two years early. Constitutionally, he can stay on until 1988. But if the Right, as expected, wins the March elections, a future conservative government would be unlikely to accept him staying on at the Elysee Palace in anything other than a ceremonial role.

His own hopes of forming a Center-Left coalition to retain parliamentary control have taken a severe knock. "The number of people who want to work with Mitterrand is dwindling rapidly," says Pierre Lellouche, associate director of the French Institute of International Relations.

Daily, the damage grows. Despite the government's strenuous effort to prove the contrary, 52% of the French believe the president and his government knew the truth about the Greenpeace affair from the beginning, a poll in the Paris newspaper Le Figaro showed yesterday. The poll also indicated that 78% felt the sabotage operation was unacceptable.

Philippe Seguin, national secretary of the largest conservative party, yesterday called for Prime Minister Fabius to resign. "The government is discredited on the international level," said Mr. Seguin, of the Rassemblement Pour la Republique, or RPR.

Another Watergate Cover-Up?

The government's strategy of first stonewalling, and then gradually giving ground, in the face of accusations about French secret service involvement in the Rainbow Warrior bombing has caused damaging speculation about a Watergate-style cover-up.

"What the French really object to is a lousy cover-up which takes the public for monkeys," says Mr. Lellouche.

Criticism swirled around the Wednesday evening television appearance by Prime Minister Fabius in which he endeavored to pin blame for ordering the bombing on former Defense Minister Hernu. But by failing to assume political responsibility himself, Mr. Fabius left the field open for further attacks from the conservative opposition.

"Either he's a liar, and is trying to foist responsibility on someone else, which isn't very courageous or truthful," said Jacques Toubon, secretary general of the neo-Gaullist RPR, "or what he says is true, he knows nothing, sees nothing and controls nothing of what goes on around him, and is incapable (of performing his task) as prime minister."

In the Le Figaro poll, conducted before Mr. Fabius's television interview, 23% thought the prime minister should resign over Greenpeace and 20% thought Mr. Mitterrand himself should quit.

Handle With Caution

Though many opposition leaders are calling for resignations, political analysts expect the top conservative contenders for the presidency, Raymond Barre, Jacques Chirac and Valery Giscard d'Estaing, to handle the issue cautiously, especially for Mr. Mitterrand. "They don't want to appear to be weakening the presidency," says Philippe Moreau Defarges, professor at the Institute of Political Studies here.

But the potential damage extends beyond the resignation issue as the scandal saps confidence in the government. Only days ago, many of the French accepted the Rainbow Warrior explosion with surprisingly little indignation. Many viewed the Greenpeace mission as an unwarranted menace to France's right to develop its own nuclear force. They applauded Mr. Mitterrand's determination to go ahead with the tests despite outside opposition.

"It's not like Watergate, when the Americans were shocked by the burglary itself," says Bruno Prats, a wine producer near Bordeaux. "But now, there is a feeling that the government has lost control," he adds. A sense that the government has bungled the affair and hidden the truth has done far more political harm than the boat sinking itself, analysts say. But moral indignation about the sinking also appears to have risen, they add.